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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHMFIS/HQ USEUCOM VAHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RHMFIS/HQ USAFE RAMSTEIN AB GE PRIORITY

RHMFIS/CDRUSAREUR HEIDELBERG GE PRIORITY

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SUBJECT: SPD PARLIAMENTARIANS WILLING TO CONTEMPLATE TROOP
INCREASE IN AFGHANISTAN TO SUPPORT TRAINING

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR GEORGE GLASS. REASONS: 1.4

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Parliamentarians from the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) indicated privately to the Ambassador that under the right circumstances, they might support a modest increase of German troops in Afghanistan. They also promised to remain "serious" on Afghanistan even though their party was no longer constrained by the responsibility of governing. The parliamentarians stressed the importance of "Afghan ownership" in achieving sustainable progress, but were somewhat cynical about what the London Conference was likely to achieve. All agreed that it was important to reverse the negative trends in Afghanistan within the next two years, well before the next Bundestag election in 2013. END SUMMARY.

OPEN TO TROOP INCREASE

¶2. (C) The Ambassador hosted a lunch on January 19 for several SPD parliamentarians who specialize in foreign and security policy to discuss the way forward in Afghanistan. As a whole, the parliamentarians were surprisingly open to the possibility of an increase in German troops for the training of the Afghan national security forces (as opposed to combat). Hans-Peter Bartels noted that the SPD had been in government when Germany agreed to join the mission in Afghanistan and therefore was hardly in a position to turn down a "reasonable request" for additional troops if the government made a convincing case that they were necessary. He stressed the need for "political leadership" in the face of public opinion polls that show 60-70 percent favor an immediate withdrawal of the Bundeswehr.

¶3. (C) At the same time, Bartels indirectly questioned whether pushing through a troop increase was worth the political cost, arguing that an extra 1,000 German soldiers would be insignificant alongside the 100,000 troops the U.S. would soon have in the country. (COMMENT: In response, the Ambassador and other Embassy officers pointed out that even with the recent increase, only a small fraction of U.S. troops will be deployed in the north and that German contributions and leadership there remain decisive. END COMMENT.) Even former Development Minister Heidmarie Wiecezorek-Zeul, who has a reputation for her anti-military views, conceded that more ground troops might be necessary to support training, although she indicated she thought the additional capacity could come through a restructuring of the current Bundeswehr presence.

SPD TO REMAIN "SERIOUS" ON AFGHANISTAN

¶4. (C) The parliamentarians acknowledged that German public opposition to the Afghanistan deployment was not very

"emotional" or salient at this point, but Johannes Pflug argued that a single dramatic event -- such as an attack that kills significant numbers of German soldiers -- could quickly inflame passions. Caucus Whip Thomas Oppermann stressed that the SPD remained "serious" about Afghanistan and would not become "opportunistic" or "populist" on this issue now that it was in opposition. There was "no easy way out of Afghanistan." He acknowledged that German political elites had not shown much leadership over the years in making the case for Germany's involvement in Afghanistan. Oppermann noted that he had invited the previous Afghan ambassador to Germany (a woman) to his district so that his constituents could hear from her firsthand what would happen if Germany were to withdraw prematurely from Afghanistan.

STRESSING AFGHAN OWNERSHIP, CONCERN ABOUT RECONCILIATION

15. (C) The parliamentarians emphasized again and again the importance of "Afghan ownership" in achieving sustainable progress. Wiecezorek-Zeul worried that the London Conference would "not really be that different" from many preceding Afghanistan conferences in getting the Afghans to address problems with governance, corruption, etc. and to begin assuming responsibility from the international community. Oppermann wondered what the point of London was, given that "the U.S. strategy is already determined." Wiecezorek-Zeul also raised concerns that under new Taliban reconciliation efforts, progress on sensitive issues like women's rights could be compromised. She argued that there should be clear "red lines" on how far the Afghan

BERLIN 00000087 002 OF 002

government and international community could go in trying to negotiate a political settlement with the Taliban. Along similar lines, Pflug emphasized the humanitarian dimension of the Afghanistan mission, noting that an unpopular military mission was "morally defensible" when it assisted desperately vulnerable people.

ELECTION IMPACT

16. (C) None of the parliamentarians expected Afghanistan to figure very prominently in the upcoming state election in North Rhineland Westfalia in May, believing that domestic issues like the economy and taxes would dominate. However, Oppermann argued that Afghanistan could be a significant issue during the next Bundestag election in 2013 if the German military commitment continued undiminished at the current level. All agreed that it was important to achieve significant progress within the next two years, well in advance of the Bundestag election. With the next U.S. presidential election in 2012, they expressed confidence that President Obama took seriously his goal of turning the current situation around by mid-2011.

MURPHY